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Our Nation's

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Second Thanksgiving.

Meyander A. Foster

Nov 24 1864

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CAUSE FOR THANKSGIVING.

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A SERMON,

PREACHED ON

The National Thanksgiving Day,

NOVEMBER 24th, 1864.

BY THE

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RECTOR OF ST. MARK'S CHURCH, IN THE BOWERIE,

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## CAUSE FOR THANKSGIVING.

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PSALM 126 : 3.

“THE Lord hath done great things for us ; whereof we are glad.”

THERE has been but one epoch in our nation's history when a Thanksgiving meant so much as it does to-day, and that was, when the nation came out of the travail and pain of revolution endued with the faculties, functions, and integral system of independence. It was her birth-period. In every element of practical power and national efficiency, she was in her babyhood. But then she was endued with every potential quality of success. Any wise mind who should have surveyed the proportions of the infant nation, scanned its countenance, marked how its pulse beat and its eye glistened with undeveloped life, would have pronounced that the baby was destined to a colossal growth. When the people of America felt themselves loosed from their old colonial dependence, and living a self-subsisting life, they

exalted the birthday to a jubilee that should have no mate or equal.

Yet there will be, I devoutly believe, another epoch of solemn dignity hardly second to that, when thanksgiving and praise from the nation's bursting heart shall resound as loudly up to the ears of our superintending God. It will be when this strife of blood is over, and the rebellion quenched, every flame and spark of it; when the system and polity which makes our nation what it is, shall be confirmed for ever; when the national life in its unity of power and action shall pervade, and actuate, and control every part of the land, and make of our nation, with all its diverse faculties, joints, and members, one corporate, whole, self-subsisting, and perpetual manhood. The nation will then, in its maturity, be what its infancy betokened. The pledge given by independence will be fully redeemed by the tried and settled power of self-government. All the moral, social, and political questions that have agitated the young years of the Republic, stirred its hot blood and roused its quick will to anger, will have been adjusted by this fierce ordeal of battle, and gladly or reluctantly the minds of the whole people will have consented to the necessity of a free but an organic and integral nation.

That time I devoutly believe will come, and there



will be a second jubilee, making the epoch memorable through the ages. As the first thanksgiving was when the nation came to life, this second will be when it comes of age. As the former epoch determined the nation's boundaries against all outside antagonists, so that second epoch will fix its internal genius and polity, not only in letter and form, but in spirit and interpretation, against all internal malcontents, grumblers, traitors, or rebels. These two Thanksgivings, the one that has been and the one that is to be, must, from their nature and occasion, be preëminent. There can be none equalling them in significance, because the matter for them is vital. Other thanksgivings may be for circumstances that affect the nation's condition, but these are for the nation's very being and prosperity.

Now, standing between these two, and only next to them in point of dignity, I place the Thanksgiving for which we are met to-day. I place it there, because I think I see, in the circumstances of the present time, a set of indications which point infallibly to that future consummation. Circumstances they are, which as they sprang legitimately out of the first seed-fact of independence, are destined to ripen into a long harvest of union and empire. If the first epoch was the beginning,

and the second will be the ripeness of the nation, then this is the period of adolescence in which the nation is getting ready to come of age and has already fixed the principles and rules that shall govern it through its life.

You sometimes see a youth, when sent out from the domestic training, grow wayward with his new liberty, and run into excesses that seem to reverse his whole tuition. But after a period of license and wantonness, he encounters some obstacle that throws him on reflection, some salient corner or turning-point, such as occurs to every man's life, where he stops, reviews his career, and readjusts his maxims of life, and then starts afresh, determined to be what a man ought to be. His whole future manhood is determined by his turning of the corner. We do not need that he should reach the technical term of his majority to tell what his manhood shall be. We can pronounce when he is nineteen, what he will be at twenty-one.

Our nation is that youth. It was thoroughly nurtured in those principles of polity which are essential to any theory of government that recognizes unity and authority. But in the overflow of our peace and thrift, the idea of government grew to be obsolete. Authority was drowned in the flood of freedom; individuality and sectionalism



overpowered the sense of unity, and the nation in its adolescence was fast lapsing away into lawlessness, till at last, a part struck into rebellion. This was the salient corner that brought her career to a pause. Her dormant idea of unity awoke suddenly under the shock of cannon. The national life became conscious when its members began to be torn apart. Every pang made that life dearer and the horrors of disunion more revolting. The stringent necessities of war created a necessity for the stringent power of government, and so all at once the people were thrown back to review the first principles of our polity, to affirm or deny the idea of nationality and to settle on the system that should guide the nation in its future.

They have settled it. The nation has turned the corner. It has bent itself along the track, in which it is to travel hereafter, unfalteringly to the end. The late election was critical of the whole question, for the national destiny was wrapped up in it. Its life or death was to be as the sunset of the eighth of November should register the solemn aye or no.

When we recall the antecedents of the election, review the manner of it, witness its sequel, and contemplate its meaning, it seems to stand forth in our American annals as only next the fourth of July.

The canvass had been angry, turbulent, and full of bad omen. The best minds had wavered between hope and fear. The strongest hearts felt a quiver and a sinking almost like collapse; for the land was torn with strife and undermined with conspiracies, and the air was full of the tumult of prayers and curses—imprecation responding to deprecation, and threats rebuking promises, and so on to the very day of trial. That day fixed the angry questions and placed the seal of finality upon the best hopes of the land.

The strife and its decision were a fearfully beautiful and impressive spectacle.

The nation through the conflict was like a state-ship when there is danger on the lee, and she is obliged suddenly to shift her tack. With her helm hard down she turns her head quickly to meet the breeze, and there for a time she stands, with her sails flapping equivocally hither and yon, or vibrating at a poise as the gale eddies to this side or to that, or strikes her in the very teeth. For a time you cannot say which way she will tend. Will she gain the other tack, or will she miss stays and fall off into her old course, to drive upon a lee shore? It is a moment full of anxiety, but only a moment. Presently you see her head swaying quietly round; the foremost sail catches

the gust, and swings her further off; the next sail and the next fill themselves with the gale, until at last, from stem to stern, aloof and aloft, her whole canvas bellies with the breeze, and the noble craft leaps like a live thing over the glad waves, and goes careering upon the rockless, unhindered ocean towards the haven where she would be.

So it was with the nation. As she stood amidst the baffling breezes of the struggle—it is not strange that the noble ship should quiver and creak with the shock, or that the fearful question arose, will she not miss stays, fall off, and go to pieces? But thanks be to God, she had moral momentum and headway enough to turn upon her course and catch the saving moment, until presently, with only the insignificant exceptions of a studding sail, a stay sail, and a little gaff topsail, which had slipped their lines and fluttered to leeward, her whole broad canvas swelled with the full-breathed inspiration from God's own heavens, and she struck forth upon the rejoicing career, where the whole world lies before her.

So full of critical importance was the period; so worthy therefore to give to this Thanksgiving a rank only next to the first.

Lest any should question the sentiment, let us spend a few moments in a moral and political

analysis of the transaction, for it is its character of high political morals that makes it so grandly worthy of commemoration and of thanksgiving.

First, then, study the aspect of the transaction as a mere process of voting. Here was one of the most exciting conflicts of popular will, short of actual blows and blood. Yet on the morning of the election it seemed almost as if every passion of turbulence had been quelled. Not a single threat of violence was put in execution. Not a sound of tumult was heard in the public way. Men marched to the polls solemnly, as if conscious of a responsibility not only momentous but sacred. A sort of Sabbath hush rested on the city, and one who walked the streets would notice even less of noise and bustle than on the quietest secular day.

This might, in our own city, be attributed in part to the known but unseen presence of a military force, under the direction of a man whose will was stern as the thunder, prompt as the lightning, and rarely missed its aim.

It may be that men moved cautiously, and acted on their proprieties because they felt that a watchful eye might be glaring upon them from any loophole, and an unseen arm of retribution poised to strike the first offence. If this was so, it reveals

strikingly the power of a presence. A man might say: "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him." It was a virtual omnipresence, whose secrecy of power passed for omnipotence, and perhaps many a ruffian nature was quelled into order by a conviction that almost imitated the natural dread of God.

Be this as it may, however, this effect could be only partial and local. For throughout the country it was not so. Everywhere the same beautiful and solemn propriety prevailed, and men acted as under the sense of a presence more potential than the influence of a man—whose eye gazed not out of loop-holes to watch their gait and gestures, but looked from the height of heaven into the closed hands that held the ballot, and into their very hearts, hidden from all other eyes. Solemn accountability to conscience seemed to characterize the transaction throughout the land. In this one feature alone there was high augury of hope, because it gave demonstration of the capacity of a great people for that last perfection of character, self-government. It showed how a multitude, a nation, yea, a world of men—for a nation like ours,



with its promiscuous tribes of many colored natures, is only a smaller world—can bring their predilections and prejudices under the control of a grand moral imperative, and how even their insurgent and ugly passions are brought to a hush and a repose under that sense of responsibility which, while it invested each voter with the dignity of a sovereign, enhanced by just so much the solemnity of his accountability to God.

It illustrated the dominion of the spiritual over the low, the material, the animal, and so became both a beautiful commentary on the best capabilities of our nature, and an imposing proof that as a republic is the true polity for man in the highest advance of civilization, so our civilization has reached the pitch where it is fitted for the best polity. It may well silence the cavil and clamor of foreigners who cannot or will not understand us, and it is a rebuke that ought to put to the blush the tribe of narrow minds and small souls, who would exchange a system in which such things can be, for one in which caste, and prerogative, and self-seeking shall weigh down the majority of their kind into the dust of perpetual debasement.

We may thank God for the Republic, and more emphatically thank him, that in this election the people have proved themselves capable and worthy of a Republic.



Again, this impression is not weakened when we turn from contemplating the process of the election, to its sequel. This solemn check to the fury of the canvass was not a mere truce of the passions, recruiting their force for a more strenuous conflict, like a tiger, crouching and crowding his limbs together for the fatal spring. It was not the syncope of exhaustion, nor the repose of fatigue. It was the assigned and intelligent termination of the strife, and it was followed by the same grand calm, unbroken to the present hour. And the calmness is not a whimpering quiet, but a dignified complacency, such as always attends a voluntary acquiescence. It is as if there had been all the while, a sort of supernal presence moving on the billows, and when the fitting hour came, it stretched its arm abroad over the tumult and said, "Peace! be still," and all the heaped excitements of passion, and pride, and wilfulness, sank into smoothness in a moment.

It was a supernal power. It was the felt majesty of law and order, representing the Divine sovereignty, and the quiet acquiescence of the people was the instinctive working of their conscientiousness in its political form of loyalty. The majority who represent the national will, had spoken through the forms of law, and henceforward their voice

bore the solemn authority, that with us, stands in the place of throne, or sceptre, or crown, or tiara. I ask your notice of this fact as a surpassing reason for thanksgiving, because it demonstrates the living supremacy of that internal power, which, desirable even in a despotism, is indispensable in a free government, namely, the spirit of loyalty.

A monarchy may, indeed, be held together by constraint and force, hooped about by edicts and police, but a republic must carry its conservative forces within itself, mingling in the same arteries with the very life-blood that nourishes its strength and makes it grow.

The existence of this principle among us in any available measure, has been doubted, even by ourselves, sometimes; while foreigners, who have analyzed and discussed our political system, have almost invariably overlooked it, and confounding our republic too hastily with the old democracies, have failed to see that the principle of loyalty is so deep-laid in our Saxon nature, that although it has rejected the visible badges of sovereignty, and swept away utterly and with contempt the conventional royalties and aristocracies of the old world, yet it only treads upon their ruins to reach up for a nobler object, and finds it in the pure abstract conception of the only authority that

represents God, and binds the conscience of man, which is loyalty to the law, and so to the government that represents it.

While this principle holds its vital vigor among us, the republic is for ever safe. Its dignity will never be perverted to that pride which topples over into folly; its prosperity will never prove its poison; and it will stand secure as it does to-day, in a shock, which, if it makes the republic reel to its foundations, will never go deeper. While the supreme idea of *ought* gleams like a cynosure to the people's eye, always revolving about the polar point of union, and never sinking below the horizon, so long will the nation avoid successfully, the perils which would else beset her voyage into an untried sea of political history.

In the next place, there is another element of the case which comes out under our analysis, furnishing another most hopeful aspect of the transaction, and a signal cause for thanksgiving to God. I find it in the fact that the election decided the vital question of union or disunion, of solid, integral, national life, or disintegration and national ruin. I will not stop to argue this preliminary point. I assume it as a postulate, that upon the issue of the question of the Presidency, there hung as an immediate or remote consequence, the very subsist-

ence of the national life. The people thought so ; and their conduct in the crisis illustrated admirably, what an astute statesman called "the sober second thought of the people." It revealed a profound popular faculty for discriminating between men and principles, between persons and platforms. For one of the candidates was richly endowed with that prime qualification for popular applause, reputation, which, whether earned or not, a mere populace is very apt easily to idolize, blowing it higher into the air with their breaths like a bubble, and shouting the louder as it glitters in the sunshine, until some side-puff of honest air breaks the bubble and leaves the starers wondering where it is, and how it was ; while the other candidate stood forth with no campaign glory and no glitter of military gold, but only the dry and modest shining of well-worn fidelity and sound sense. And the people did, by their election, show how they can distinguish the gold from the gilding, and postpone the man for the principle. We all know with what assiduity and ingenious combination the foibles, misadventures, and mistakes of the administration were trumpeted by its enemies ; and how the noise was broken into small echoes of cavil at the ignorance and vulgarity, and misjudgment of the men in office, from the mouths of many who would be



thought to possess both patriotism and sense ; and this to such a degree as to suggest the query whether they would not even destroy the government for the sake of thwarting the governors. It was sad and sickening to hear their blatant blame of particular measures, while they spoke only in parenthesis and with bated breath the rare and wholesome words of loyalty ; to see how insensible they were to the grandeur of the crisis in their microscopic zeal for the little details of fault-finding. It was the case over again of the cobbler who criticised the noble statue of Praxiteles, by finding fault with the tie of its sandal. It was to decry the solar system because the sun has its spots, or the moon is sometimes gibbous, or the stars shine with a twinkle.

So near did the practice approach to a fashion of talking, that six months ago it seemed almost unavoidable that the administration must be supplanted. But with the crisis came the people's "sober second thought," whose voice was as the voice of God, not only in its power, but in its wisdom—declaring that principle was more than persons, and that the administration was a principle. It was like a fresh autumn air from the clear north-west. The whole mosquito tribe of small fault-finders, who had revelled with buzz

and sting through their season, teasing the souls of loyal men, were struck with chill, and sang and stung no more. It was a fresh demonstration that true democracy has a divinity about it; that the sub-stratum of the popular character is common-sense, which is only divine reason acting according to the nature of things.

So that the fact that the election, in its purpose and meaning, was a real triumph of principle over passion, or prejudice, or personal preference, is in itself a ground of such confidence in a Republic, as to be matter of earnest thanksgiving to Him, who turns the hearts and minds of the people as the rivers of water are turned.

Again, I apprehend that this conviction will be deepened when we not only consider that the election was a principle, but remember what that principle was. The plain issue was an instant peace, or protracted war. Peace, peace! The theme was recommended by sacred sweet songs of good will and love to our fellow-men. It was beautified by poems and pictures of domestic quiet and joy, utilized by freedom from taxes, prosperous business, and cheap bread. While war, grim war, was sung in dirge notes as the fruit of hell, the pastime of devils, a thing of lust and blood, gloating over the agony of our kith and kin; dragging our children



away to make them the dealers or victims of death; choking the channels of prosperity, loading us with taxation, and playing the despot with our dearest rights. What heart of flesh could abide that contrast? Yet the wise heart of the people did. They saw that peace had, in this connection, another sense and meaning. It meant political separation, social antagonism, hopeless moral repugnances with a juxtaposition that insured perpetual strife and bloodshed. It meant the riveting of fetters on the bodies and souls of millions of fellow-creatures, every one of whom could say, Am I not a brother? Am I not a sister?—for whose bodies and souls our success thus far has made us responsible to our God and theirs, to their Saviour as well as ours.

Peace with separation signified, moreover, the base surrender of all that our manliness and patriotism had struggled for, and so it degraded our manhood, and travestied our patriotism. It signified the useless sacrifice of our children's blood, and so reproached their devotion; it signified the greater sacrifice of that glorious political heritage bought by our fathers' blood, and so did foul dishonor to their sacred fame. It signified to our living children and to their children an entail of that heritage in broken remnants, bankrupted and

dishonored for ever. This was peace in its true interpretation; and as opposed to this, was war in its true interpretation. For war in this connection meant political unity, cemented so strongly by human blood that no fratricidal hand would ever dare to pluck it asunder again. It meant such Christ-like work of freedom to all as should obliterate the black blot on our country's fame, and make us a nation whom God would love to bless, for aiding His Son's blessed ministry. It meant an uncontradicted theory of government, a homogeneous people, with a common character and a catholic interest. It meant the burial of all vital differences and therefore, the perpetuity of the state. It meant honor, gratitude, patriotism, and paternal care, and, therefore, a perpetuity of blessing.

The people understood these diverse interpretations. They weighed them in the balance of truth and equity, and they decided deliberately that the resulting benefits unspeakably compensated for the whole mighty mass of treasure, of trouble, of blood, and of sorrow which are the cost of war. And they decided as God has always decided. For nothing is more conspicuous on the face of providential history than the exceeding lightness in which God holds human life, when it impedes the execution of His plans and purposes.

Every notable advance of the race in civilization or religion has always been gained only by human sacrifices of sometimes appalling measure.

It shows us that in the Divine estimate of things, His single purpose outweighs the countless interests of the immediate world.

It shows us that by the providential scale, principles are substances, and men and things are only accidents.

When a man can raise himself to this pitch of moral elevation, regarding himself and his interest as subordinate to some God-approved purpose or achievement, he approaches the godlike. While he holds to a supreme principle he carries an inspiration within him, which is like a communion with heaven. He has grown superior to his accidents. He has immortality teeming in his very consciousness. He is a seer. He is a martyr. He is getting ready to be a perfected saint. He treads the world beneath his feet. He may pass away, but not the principles he has enounced. You may slay him, but the truth will rise out of his dull dust, luminous with the glory of the resurrection.

When you see a whole people actuated by this inspiration, working like an instinct of life, travailing with the big birth of some truth or principle that could be contained in narrowness and secrecy

no longer, but struggles forth into expression and practical power; when the nation utters its moral consciousness by a distinct decree of its will; when the ideas of justice and benevolence and all moral and social right cease to float and glimmer through the nation's mind like vapory and impracticable things, but crystallize into a definite theory of political action; when the noble moral impulses that have hitherto stirred the nation's heart with only an embryo force, at length come forth with the form and embodiment and fixedness and life of positive supreme law; then there is no rank in the historical scale of dignity which that nation may not modestly and justly claim for itself; and there is no reach of destiny to be conceded by men, or to be owned and blessed of God, to which the nation may not lawfully aspire. It has inaugurated the joint sovereignty of the moral and the political in the lasting forms of its government, and thereby made the polity as enduring as the morality,—everduring.

This is the spirit and character evoked by the crisis that is upon us, and I devoutly believe that with all due allowance for private or partisan feeling, the huge vote which decided that the war shall go on at whatever cost, was a vote for principle, for conscience, for Christ, and for the bless-

ing of the race whom Christ died to liberate and to save.

If this was so, was there ever a more majestic meaning given to a people's voice? Did the great national heart ever swell to such a noble issue? You read in this record the joint assent of God and man in one holy purpose, binding man to God in supreme allegiance, and God to man in supreme approval, so that the alliance cannot be broken. And while to-day we thank Him that the irrevocable vote of the people has been the utterance of His fixed purpose of love and well-doing to our race, may we not at the same time, let our gratitude grow into a royal assurance of success to the war, and of perpetuity to the nation? The whole long order of Divine Providence has indicated our land as the chosen place where human character and the earthly hopes of man shall culminate, in their last and beautiful brightness. Thus far there have been occasional dark clouds, that have broken the streaming splendor of our rising. They were the exhalations of the nation's crimes and sins, some of them black with the exceeding guilt of injustice, cruelty, and oppression. Thank God, the vote of the people has done what it could to compensate that wrong, and given pledge to heaven that with its own holy help the nation will sin thus no more.



With this grand purpose grafted from God's mind into ours, let the nation go on to finish its own and God's work, and it shall never want His almightiness to bestow victory, prosperity, and abiding peace upon the Republic. Let the nation ratify the vote of this election by binding it with iron in the fundamental law of the land, and the black cloud will be all gone. The streaming light of our ascension will be broken by no bars of darkness; we shall rise higher and higher, brighter and brighter to the millennium. When that vote shall be passed; when our Constitution shall echo the Gospel; then, the rebellion conquered and our foes turned again to be our brethren, then will come that third Thanksgiving, to which this one looks so surely forward. And then no other Thanksgiving like it, until the universal praise of the millennium itself, for a realized Gospel; of "glory to God in the highest, peace on all the earth, and abounding good will to man and to all men." Meanwhile and to-day we will sing: "The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."



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